Contrastive Rhetoric

Cross-cultural aspects of second-language writing

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Writing in a second language: anecdotal evidence about problems and solutions

English as a second language (ESL) students often mention that when they write in English as a second language they translate, or attempt to translate, first language words, phrases, and organization into English. A Chinese ESL student describes his writing process as follows:

> While choosing Chinese words is a second nature for me, extracting the proper English word is much more difficult. In casual communication, my inner thoughts are like free river flowing directly from my mind to the paper. I can write whatever appears in my mind. When I write compositions, I come into trouble. There are many good sources I could get from the Chinese culture while I write in Chinese: such as literary quotations, famous old stories, and ancient word of wisdom. These rich sources definitely influence my paper quality in Chinese. Unfortunately examples like this are very hard to translate to English. Sometime I try to make a joke, but it loses its impact in translation. Finding the right English word to match what I am thinking in Chinese is very frustrating and often blocks my writing process. To continue my writing, I have two choices generally. One is to give up this sentence and try to express the same meaning in another way. The other alternative is to check a Chinese-English dictionary. However, translating like that usually leaves me with vague meanings and the impact is lost in the tattered pages of my dictionary. Writing like this is very choppy and does not flow.

This student is an advanced-level ESL student enrolled in a freshman English class. After attending several ESL courses at an American university, he still seeks to translate from Chinese into English in his ESL writing.

An ESL student from Iran ponders her writing process at the end of a freshman English class:

> Thinking in English rather than in Persian or in French was something that I had to take into consideration every time I started to write something. Many times I explained an idea the way I used to do in Iran and the reader could not understand my point. For example in my essay about "friendship," I used a Persian proverb and my writing group members did not really understand its

meaning so I had to change it. Gradually I learned to think in English but I still have to practice more.

This student recognizes the need to think in English just as she has learned to think in French, her first second language.

In her eloquent memoir, *Lost in Translation. Life in a New Language,* Eva Hoffman, editor of *The New York Times Book Review* and a native speaker of Polish, describes the feeling of not being able to find the right words in the new language:

> But mostly, the problem is that the signifier has becomes severed from the signified. The words I learn now don't stand for things in the same unquestioned way they did in my native tongue. "River" in Polish was a vital sound, energized with the essence of riverhood, of my rivers, of my being immersed in rivers. "River" in English is cold – a word without an aura. It has no accumulated associations for me, and it does not give off the radiating haze of connotation. It does not evoke. (Hoffman 1989, 106)

Hoffman's description of the difficult decision about the language in which to write her adolescent diary is equally vivid in suggesting that bilinguals think differently in their two languages.

> Because I have to choose something, I finally choose English. If I'm to write about the present, I have to write in the language of the present, even if it's not the language of the self. As a result, the diary becomes surely one of the more impersonal exercises of the sort produced by an adolescent girl. These are no sentimental reflections of rejected love, eruptions of familial anger, or consoling broodings about death. English is not the language of such emotions. Instead I set down my reflections on the ugliness of wrestling, on the elegance of Mozart, and on how Dostoyevsky puts me in mind of El Greco. I write down Thoughts. I Write. (Hoffman 1989, 121)

As a native of Finland, I can identify with some of the stages Hoffman went through. My first term papers in graduate courses were painfully hard to conceptualize and write because my English graduate studies in Finland had primarily tested knowledge through written examinations, not through writing term papers. I remember starting on papers early in the semester and involving native English-speaking roommates as editors. Twenty years later, after earning a Ph.D. and gaining several years of teaching and research experience in applied linguistics in the United States, I finally think that I am close to the final stage of second language development. This stage allows a learner to let ideas flow on paper without the interference of having to translate them or being overly conscious of the language. With this last stage comes confidence in oneself as a writer in English. This does not mean, of course, that I am unaware of some nonnativeness in my writing. For example, because Finnish uses neither articles nor prepositions, I tend to use them inappropriately.

Thus, it is not surprising that ESL teachers often comment that ESL students use patterns of language and stylistic conventions that they have

learned in their native languages and cultures. This transfer is not just idiosyncratic variation but involves recurring patterns of organization and rhetorical conventions reminiscent of writing in the students' native language and culture. Acknowledgment of this aspect of second language acquisition led to the development of contrastive rhetoric in the United States, where rhetoric and the teaching of writing have been considered important aspects of both first and second language instruction for decades.

Study of second language writing: the emergence of contrastive rhetoric

Contrastive rhetoric is an area of research in second language acquisition that identifies problems in composition encountered by second language writers and, by referring to the rhetorical strategies of the first language, attempts to explain them. Initiated almost thirty years ago by the American applied linguist Robert Kaplan, contrastive rhetoric maintains that language and writing are cultural phenomena. As a direct consequence, each language has rhetorical conventions unique to it. Furthermore, Kaplan asserted, the linguistic and rhetorical conventions of the first language interfere with writing in the second language.

It is fair to say that contrastive rhetoric was the first serious attempt by applied linguists in the United States to explain second language writing. It is only within the past twenty years, however, that writing skills and the role of transfer in particular have been of interest to applied linguistic researchers. For decades, writing was neglected as an area of study because of the emphasis on teaching spoken language during the dominance of audiolingual methodology.

In the past two decades, the study of writing has become part of the mainstream in applied linguistics. Reasons for this change are many: the increased understanding of language learners' needs to read and write in the target language; the enhanced interdisciplinary approach to studying second language acquisition through educational, rhetorical, and anthropological methods; and new trends in linguistics. These new trends emphasize discourse analyses (analyses that extend beyond the sentence level) and include descriptions of sociolinguistic variations such as the different speech patterns of men and women and of speakers of different dialects of the same language.

In research on second language writing, contrastive studies have received more attention than perhaps any other single issue. The importance of contrastive studies for the understanding of cultural particulars as well as linguistic universals is summarized well by Marie-Paule Péry-Woodley:

> Contrasting and comparing are basic to any form of anthropological investigation, and this includes of course linguistic investigation. It is the contrastive light which shows a particular practice as specific to a group; conversely, it is the contrastive approach which allows the identification of universals. Not only is a contrastive stance a superlative way of gaining precise descriptive knowledge about individual languages and cultures, it is invaluable in the quest for a general understanding of language-based communication, as it forces the researcher to relativise particular ways of doing things with language: it is the best antidote to "ethno/linguocentricity." (Péry-Woodley 1990, 143)

It is time, therefore, to analyze the achievements of contrastive analyses of composition in order to determine its universals as well as its cross-cultural particulars.

Aims, purposes, and outline of this book

This book has three purposes. It discusses the general value of contrastive rhetoric in the field of applied linguistics, and suggests practical implications for teachers and researchers. More important, it defines an emerging contrastive rhetoric discipline that draws on relevant interdisciplinary fields, particularly composition studies, rhetoric, text linguistics, and cultural anthropology.

For thirty years, contrastive rhetoric has been practiced within a ruling paradigm suggested by Kaplan's first research. However, as Thomas S. Kuhn has observed (Kuhn 1970, 104), all paradigms are corrigible under the impact of new emphases, new points of view. Accordingly, after assessing the principles of contrastive rhetoric, as well as its significant research, this book will explore the changing paradigm.

New designs for contrastive rhetoric studies will be suggested. There is an analogy with modern studies in rhetoric, which have proposed a "new rhetoric" as opposed to classical rhetoric. Classical rhetoric was concerned primarily with the logic of an argument and its persuasiveness: making a point and winning over an audience through a coherent, convincing presentation. The reader or auditor was considered a largely passive participant. The "new rhetoric," best explained by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) in *The New Rhetoric. A Treatise on Argumentation,* focuses on the achievement of a particular effect on the audience. (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's "new rhetoric" is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.)

Perelman and others who advocate the "new rhetoric" did not of course abandon classical rhetoric completely, but instead built on it. In the same way, the new extended paradigm of contrastive rhetoric builds on the foundation of the "traditional" contrastive rhetoric of Kaplan's model. This model was influenced by classical rhetoric and was

developed as part of the applied linguistics of the 1960s. The extended contrastive rhetoric takes a broader, more communicative view of rhetoric, paralleling the developments in "new rhetoric"; it has been influenced by developments in applied linguistics in the 1970s and 1980s. In addition, it has expanded across interdisciplinary boundaries. No longer restricted to cross-cultural models of writing supplied by contemporary applied linguistics, contrastive rhetoric now includes models of writing developed in education, composition pedagogy, and translation studies.

The new perspective of contrastive rhetoric thus increasingly reflects the multicultural pluralism of these related disciplines even as it benefits from and continuously enriches its own point of view. Not surprisingly, such a perspective, especially in its interdisciplinary aspect, has been found to be helpful to teachers and insightful for researchers in applied linguistics. Hence the survey of research in contrastive rhetoric supplied in this book.

It is frequently said that contrastive rhetoric and contrastive rhetoric methodology are still in their formative stages (Purves 1988, 15). As a result, perhaps, contrastive rhetoric has been criticized because it lacks a single methodology and a single research program. But this multidimensionality is a positive feature because it allows for multiple analyses of the same issue. Consequently, contrastive rhetoric will be broadly defined in the context of English teaching. Research on writing in English as a second language (ESL) or in English as a foreign language (EFL) that takes a cross-linguistic perspective will be included. Thus, for example, we shall not be restricted to contrastive rhetoric conducted in or with relevance to traditional ESL writing courses, which in North America generally deal with prefreshman or freshman English writing. Instead, we will examine contrastive studies with relevance for English for specific purposes (ESP) instruction and practical use. Examining the importance of contrastive rhetoric at levels beyond basic and freshman English composition is necessary because of the expansion of ESL instruction to academic and content-area literacy.

Subsequent chapters fall into three sections: (1) Chapters 2 and 3 deal with the early phases of contrastive rhetoric (although the emphasis of this book is on recent approaches, it is important to review some earlier contrastive rhetoric research), (2) Chapters 4 through 8 deal with its interfaces with other fields, and (3) Chapters 9 and 10 consider practical applications and methodological concerns. Thus, Chapter 2 discusses the historical development of contrastive rhetoric in applied linguistics as well as its future directions, whereas Chapter 3 provides an evaluation of contrastive rhetoric studies beginning with Kaplan's 1966 study. Specific studies are categorized by the language in question, and generalizations are provided about language contrasts.

In Part 2, (dealing with the interfaces of contrastive rhetoric with other

related fields), Chapter 4 provides an overview of theories of first language (L1) rhetoric and composition instruction from the mid 1970s to the mid 1990s and their effects on second language (L2) composition instruction and contrastive rhetoric. Foci in L1 composition in the 1980s have been on the examination of writers' cognitive processes in the act of writing and, in the early 1990s, on the context and situation of writing and their effects on the creation of meaning in writing.

Chapter 5 surveys a new area of contrastive investigation, text linguistic studies. There are still very few studies in this area, and they deal with contrasts between English and a number of languages: Swedish, Finnish, Norwegian, and English; Hebrew and English; Farsi and English; Chinese and English; Japanese and English; and Czech and English. Although most of the research deals with analyzing a specific grammatical phenomenon in a discourse, some of it provides analytical tools to discover how full texts work as functional wholes with multiple interacting levels. A great deal of the research has been conducted in Europe and Asia as well as in North America.

Chapter 6 discusses contrastive research, the main focus of which is the acquisition and development of literacy skills in the first language and their effect on L2 writing. The effect of the educational and cultural atmosphere on L1 writing, as well as in some cases on L2 (e.g., Chinese-speaking students in China, English-speaking students in the United States), is described. Chapter 7 discusses the field of translation studies and its influence on contrastive rhetoric. Chapter 8 reviews an increasingly important new area of study, contrastive writing in English for specific purposes, settings, and different genres. Studies in this area examine advanced second language writing in such varied fields as business, economics, and science. Here, again, American developments are somewhat paralled by European efforts.

Chapter 9 reviews the research methodologies of contrastive rhetoric. Chapter 10 describes the implications of contrastive rhetoric for the teaching and testing of second language writing and discusses future research directions that contrastive rhetoric needs to or is likely to take. The chapter also indicates possible areas of future research.

Building a comprehensive theory of contrastive rhetoric

Kaplan's first study of contrastive rhetoric provided a model of writing for a theory of second language teaching that is more useful in some applications than in others. For example, the model is not particularly relevant for the theory of translation, since it refers to second language texts only when speculating about first language influence. A model for translation needs to compare texts in both first languages, the source

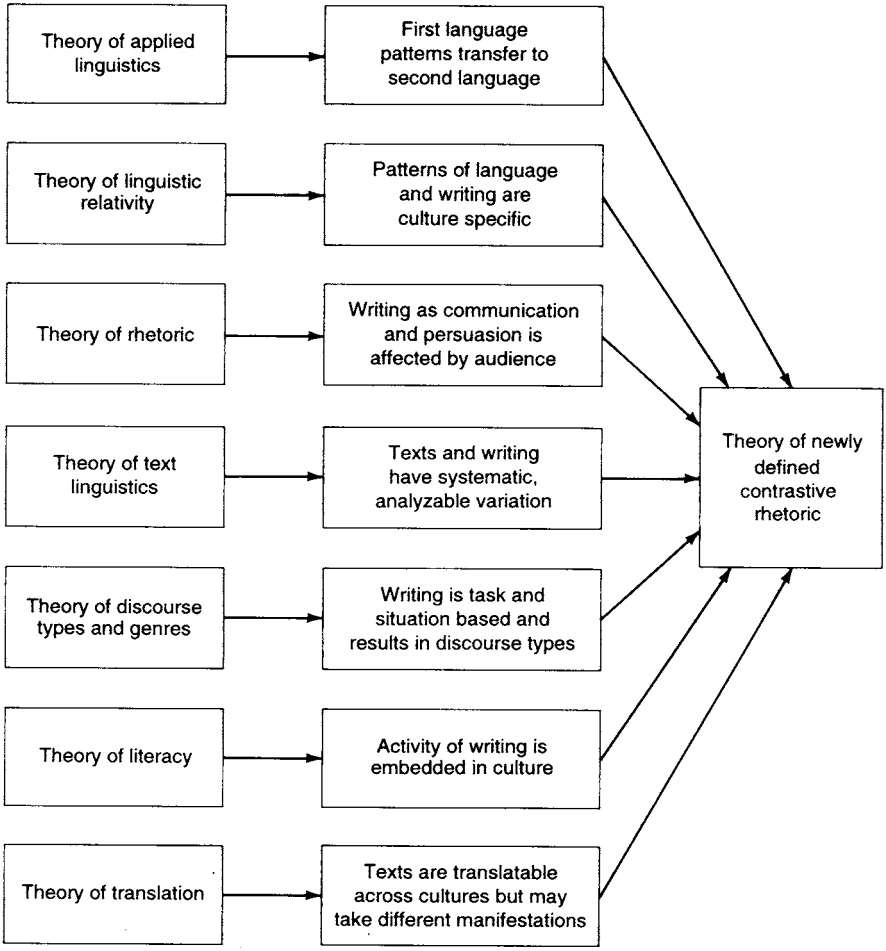

Figure 1 Influences on newly defined contrastive rhetoric.

language (in which the text was originally written) and the target language (into which the text was translated.) But Kaplan's model is indeed useful in evaluating second language written products, even though a different model is needed to describe differences in composing processes across cultures. Finally, his model helps to describe essays written by college students for school purposes. However, I will argue in this book that a different contrastive model is needed for the description of cross-cultural writing in academic and professional situations. Moreover, the concept of contrastive rhetoric adopted is more inclusive than the concept that the early researchers in the field would have employed.

Figure 1 summarizes the influence of various theories on contrastive rhetoric. Although the figure shows one-directional influences, there is, of course, bidirectionality. A theory of contrastive rhetoric is influenced by many theories, as the figure shows. Only brief descriptions of the relationships follow here; subsequent chapters elaborate on the theories and the relationships.

Theory of applied linguistics

A theory of applied linguistics provides contrastive rhetoric with a theory of language transfer from first language to second language. It also influences contrastive rhetorical research by keeping it oriented to applied problems – problems of learners in foreign language classes. In addition, the theory of applied linguistics provides contrastive rhetoric with definitions of levels of language proficiency, relationships among different language skills, measurement of language skills, and variables related to the acquisition and learning of languages.

Theory of linguistic relativity

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity is basic to contrastive rhetoric because it suggests that different languages affect perception and thought in different ways. The strong version of the hypothesis, the version that insists that language controls thought and perception, has been disproven; but the weak version, that language influences thought, is regaining acceptability in linguistics and psychology (Hunt and Agnoli 1991). Hence, instead of focusing on universals of language and thought, many psychologists and linguists have begun to identify cultural differences. A similar trend is taking place in composition studies; cultural and linguistic backgrounds are shown to affect writing activity and written products. A more thorough discussion of linguistic relativity is given in Chapter 3.

Theory of rhetoric

A theory of rhetoric is obviously fundamental to contrastive rhetoric. It is interested in assessing the direct or indirect effect of communication on the hearer or reader. Kaplan's first model of contrastive rhetoric was based on Aristotelean rhetoric and logic. Naturally, rhetoric, and especially modern rhetoric, is interested in the situational relativity of communicative effectiveness. These issues will be explored more thoroughly in Chapter 4.

Theory of text linguistics

A theory of text linguistics provides a descriptive apparatus for describing textual cohesion, structures of texts, theme dynamics, and metatextual features. Hence it is basic to contrastive rhetoric procedures. Text linguistics is here treated synonymously with text analysis, discourse analysis, and discourse linguistics of texts. Most recent publications treat text linguistics as an analysis of written texts that extends beyond the sentence level and considers the communicative constraints of the context (van Dijk 1985b). See Chapter 5 for a full discussion of these issues.

Theory of discourse types and genres

Constrastive rhetoric is applicable to many different kinds of texts. Hence a theory of text types and genres is needed to establish the comparability of texts. Three definitions will be used: (1) discourse type, selected according to the aim of the discourse, such as argumentative prose, (2) text type, selected according to the mode of discourse, such as narrative passage in an argumentative text, and (3) genre, which refers to texts formed according to cultural and traditional expectations as required by specific purposes and tasks such as a research report in biology. The first two distinctions follow Kinneavy's (1971) theories of aims and modes as well as Virtanen's (1990; 1992) review of text types; the third definition, genre, follows Swales's (1990b) theory of genre, which defines genre as a text type that is ultimately determined by the task and situation and is immediately defined by communicative purpose.

Theory of literacy

A comprehensive theory of contrastive rhetoric deals with the development of literacies, not merely written products. Recent theories of literacy are beneficial in documenting why certain styles of writing are valued in certain cultures as well as in giving information about the teaching and learning of literacy cross-culturally.

Theory of translation

The field of translation studies has much in common with contrastive rhetoric. Both areas stem from linguistics and, in the past decade, have expanded their scopes beyond structural analyses and literal translations. Theories of translation have a great deal to offer to contrastive rhetoric. These issues will be discussed in Chapter 7.